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Oct 2nd, 8:45 AM - 10:15 AM

# Girl Power or Girl Child: Beyond Victory and Victimization in Advocacy for Girls around the World (abstract)

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Johnson, Kelli Lyon, "Girl Power or Girl Child: Beyond Victory and Victimization in Advocacy for Girls around the World (abstract)" (2015). *The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy*. 1.  
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## **The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy**

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Oct. 2-3, 2015, Dayton, Ohio

For the archive of the conference, see [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human\\_rights/2015/](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights/2015/)

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**Research Panel:** Visualizing Rights

**Presenter:** Kelli Lyon Johnson

**Title:** Girl Power or Girl Child: Beyond Victory and Victimization in Advocacy for Girls around the World

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes advocacy campaigns and research reports to demonstrate the construction of “the girl child” as both empowered (or worthy of empowerment) and as exploited and excluded. Since 1995, when the Beijing Platform for Action of the United Nations Conference on Women identified her as one of twelve critical areas for concern, “the girl child” has been frequently mobilized in human rights campaigns and research. Advocacy campaigns and human rights reports frequently deploy “the girl” or “the girl child” as a metric against which to judge nations for her protection and provision and as a tool to influence foreign policy. At the same time, however, that they appear in these campaigns and reports, girls are still not achieving the gains called for in the Beijing Platform or the Millennium Development Goals. I suggest that part of the problem is that the rhetorical use of “the girl child” often undermines the goals of human rights organizations and activists. Advocacy and research strategies that invoke “girl power” and “the girl child” position girls as victims, thus constraining their agency and preventing their public participation, including advocacy campaigns, public policy work, and working for and with other children. A better understanding of the rhetorical and political uses of “the girl child” offers the possibility of strengthening human rights advocacy and research based on children’s rights, ultimately resulting in more effective programs for rights groups and organizations working with girls around the world.

**Keywords:** children’s rights; girls’ rights; rights discourses; advocacy; campaigns

**Biography:** Kelli Lyon Johnson is Associate Professor of English and Affiliate in Justice and Community Studies at Miami University Hamilton where she teaches courses on human trafficking, nonprofit studies, writing, and literature. She is the author most recently of an article on contemporary slave narratives and a book chapter on children in contemporary slavery.